CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Blues, Criticism, and the Signifying Trickster

Author(s): Ayana Smith

Source: *Popular Music*, May, 2005, Vol. 24, No. 2, Literature and Music (May, 2005), pp. 179-191

Published by: Cambridge University Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/3877642

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

Cambridge University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Popular Music*

JSTOR

This content downloaded from
158.135.1.178 on Sun, 23 May 2021 22:43:47 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Popular Music (2005) Volume 24/2. Copyright © 2005 Cambridge University Press, pp. 179–191
doi:10.1017/S0261143005000449 Printed in the United Kingdom

Blues, criticism, and the signifying trickster

AYANA SMITH

Abstract

Scholars in the field of literary theory have defined clearly the role of signifying in African-American literature. This article identifies one aspect of the signifying tradition and its influence on the early blues tradition. Since the Signifying Monkey is the ultimate trickster in the African-American narrative tradition, this article presents evidence for considering the blues singer as a trickster figure at several different levels. First, the singer identifies with the trickster's character traits through pseudo-autobiographical content in song narratives, particularly in expressing socially aggressive or unacceptable exploits. Second, the trickster figure can be perceived as the singer's alter ego, as in songs about the boll weevil and similar folk characters. Third, the topics or tropes associated with crossroads and railways, used frequently in blues texts, relate to the liminal nature of Esu-Elegbara (the African ancestor of the Signifying Monkey), who embodies the boundary between the word and its (mis)interpretation.

Introduction

Both the blues aesthetic and the African-American signifying tradition have engendered a diverse array of new critical approaches to African-American literature. Many of these approaches pertinent to literary studies are also applicable to music. Since the very nature of the blues incorporates an oral form of literacy, it is only natural that commonalities should exist between these two art forms. This study examines two related literary theories – that of the Signifying Monkey as an explanation of double meaning and narrative process, and the use of metaphorical border crossings to express traditional ideas in starkly contrasting modern contexts – and demonstrates how both are manifested in the blues. In order to fully understand the first of these theories, that of signifying, we must first turn to a definition of the trickster figure as it appears in African-American folk and literary narratives.

Folk-heroes, tricksters and villains

A trickster in the African-American tradition is one who flouts the norms of society, using cunning, humour and deceit to obtain personal gain. Often this character embodies a limitation of some sort, one who is likely to be trod upon by others with more power or physical strength. Thus, it is superiority in wit that allows the trickster to gain the upper hand. In the African-American tradition, the trickster figure is often an animal character, such as the famous example of Br'er Rabbit, but there are also narratives of human tricksters, as in the Old John tales or the 'Puttin' on Ole' Massa' series.

This content downloaded from
158.135.1.178 on Sun, 23 May 2021 22:43:47 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

The African-American trickster tales have their roots in slavery. As a whole, the tradition embodies a narrative method of dealing psychologically with power struggles and lack of self-determination. The telling of tales that demonstrate the achievement of power through cunning and deceit allowed the slave to identify, albeit briefly, with the antics of the folk hero. In a narrative world where reality is inverted, and double meanings abound, one could find temporary solace. As literary theorist Jeanne Rosier Smith writes in her book entitled *Writing Tricksters*, the slave particularly identified with the duplicity of the trickster figure:

> Because the American slave system involved living with whites in daily power-based relationships, African American trickster tales strongly reflect the necessity for the trickster's subversive, masking, signifying skills. Maintaining any sort of cultural identity under slavery demanded an overt acceptance of, and covert resistance to, the dehumanizing racial myths of slavery . . . Awareness of coexisting, contradictory versions of reality and an ability to operate and express one's identity at a 'metalevel' – primary trickster skills – became a key to survival for Africans in America. (Smith 1997, pp. 113–14)

The trickster figure is often portrayed as one who lives outside the margins of society. He fits into no normalised pattern of social behaviour, and it is this rebel-like tendency that allows him to become the hero of the trickster tale. The trickster represents everything one would like to do but cannot. The trickster therefore presents an alternative, vicarious existence that contrasts with the strict boundaries of slave existence. In a society with limited roles available to African-Americans, the trickster provides an outlet for the expression of socially unacceptable themes.

Although originating in oral narratives, the trickster has transcended its folk beginnings and become a frequent character, under various guises, in the African-American literary tradition. Smith has found many examples of newly interpreted trickster narratives in female American literatures from various ethnic groups, including African-Americans.

Similarly, the trickster figure appears in the early blues tradition. Many blues songs seem to elevate a folk hero, whether real or imagined. In some cases the songs portray positive role models, such as John Henry, the railroad steel driver who died of a heart attack just after winning a stake-driving competition with a steam engine, and was further immortalised in 'Spike Driver Blues' by Mississippi John Hurt. In other cases, the protagonist could be a folk villain, like the infamous Joe Turney of 'Joe Turner Blues' who rounded up African-American men to provide labourers for prison work camps. As W.C. Handy writes in his autobiography *Father of the Blues*:

> It goes back to Joe Turney (also called Turner), brother of Pete Turney, one-time governor of Tennessee. Joe had the responsibility of taking Negro prisoners from Memphis to the penitentiary at Nashville. Sometimes he took them to the 'farms' along the Mississippi. Their crimes, when indeed there were any crimes, were usually very minor, the object of the arrests being to provide needed labour for spots along the river . . . That night, perhaps, there would be weeping and wailing among the dusky belles. If one of them chanced to ask a neighbour what had become of the sweet good man, she was likely to receive the pat reply, 'They tell me Joe Turner's come and gone'. (Handy 1957, pp. 151–2)

Railroad Bill, an outlaw whose life is portrayed in many African-American folk tales and ballads, also makes an appearance in the blues in Will Bennett's 1930 song entitled 'Railroad Bill': 'Railroad Bill ought to be killed/Never worked and he never will' (ll. 1–2; as transcribed in Taft 1983, p. 19[1]). Railroad Bill provides a particularly fertile subject for the blues musician, since he links together two prominent themes in the blues – the trickster and the railroad. This association unfolds in a complex way; as a

This content downloaded from
158.135.1.178 on Sun, 23 May 2021 22:43:47 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

vehicle that enables the migratory lifestyle so frequently depicted in the blues, the train becomes a sort of inanimate trickster figure. As with other folk heroes and villains of the blues, the railroad is linked to significant trickster characteristics that glorify its power and omnipresence in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century African-American life.

Although only the introductory section of Bennett's 'Railroad Bill' deals explicitly with the song's title character, these first four lines initiate a series of only marginally related narrative threads on the trickster theme. The central portion of the poem, in lines five through fifteen, portrays the narrator imitating the ostensible protagonist, Railroad Bill: 'Buy me a gun just as long as my arm/Kill everybody ever done me wrong' (ll. 9–10; Taft 1983, p. 20). In this way, the narrator takes on the persona and characteristics of the villain trickster. To further emphasise the narrator's self-portrait as a trickster, the remainder of the text depicts several prominent trickster characteristics – defiance ('Going to drink my liquor drink it and win/Doctor said it will kill me but he never said when', ll. 18–19; Taft 1983, p. 20), comical exaggeration ('If the river was brandy and I was a duck/I'd sink to the bottom and I'd never come up', ll. 20–1; Taft 1983, p. 20), and trading insults ('Son you talk about your honey you ought to see mine/She's humpbacked bow-legged crippled and blind', ll. 24–5; Taft 1983, p. 20). The importance of these loosely connected narrative threads is situated not in their cohesion as a linear storytelling unit, but in their portrayal of the narrator as a trickster that bears the same level of destructive propensity as Railroad Bill. In essence, the main theme of the text is not Railroad Bill, but an authorial statement – 'I'm as *bad* as Railroad Bill'.

Destructive historical events are often accorded a mythic status, as in musical accounts of devastating floods and boll weevil infestations. The boll weevil, an insect that destroyed southern cotton plantations from 1895–1905, became a folk hero-like character through the blues. Although he is vilified in Ma Rainey's 'Bo-Weevil Blues' of 1923 ('I don't want no man to put no sugar in my tea/That bug is so evil I'm afraid it might poison me', ll. 5–6; Taft 1983, p. 219), he later becomes a metaphor for the tenacity of African-Americans in Charley Patton's 'Mississippi Bo Weevil Blues' of 1929 ('Boll weevil told the farmer that I ain't going to treat you fair/Took all the blossoms and leave you an empty square', ll. 13–14; Taft 1983, p. 211).

Both songs personify the boll weevil in different ways. In Ma Rainey's song, line one personifies the boll weevil as a blues singer, while line two marks the pervasiveness of his invasion: 'Hey boll weevil don't sing the blues no more;/Boll weevil's here boll weevil's everywhere you go' (ll. 1–2; Taft 1983, p. 219). Beginning in line three, however, a narrative shift occurs, in which the narrator herself identifies with the boll weevil, using the first person ('I'm a lone boll weevil'), and continuing to a double entendre with sexual overtones: 'The evil boll weevil loves some vine' (l. 4). The conclusion reverses and rejects the narrator's previous self-identification with the boll weevil trickster, instead projecting those qualities onto an external male character, while emphasising the destructive qualities of this trickster figure (ll. 5–6, quoted above). Several themes that recur frequently in early folk blues texts are presented in this song: the equation of the blues with a trickster figure, the authorial assumption of the trickster figure as an alter ego, and the portrayal of trickster figures as destructive, evil or sexually promiscuous.

Similarities exist between Rainey's and Patton's songs, in depicting the pervasive destruction of the boll weevil: 'Well I saw the boll weevil Lord a-circle Lordy in the air/The next time I seen him Lord he had his family there' (Patton, ll. 5–6;

This content downloaded from
158.135.1.178 on Sun, 23 May 2021 22:43:47 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Taft 1983, p. 210). There are also some significant thematic differences in the treatment of the boll weevil as a character. While Rainey's song portrays the boll weevil as an omnipresent force, Patton's song describes the boll weevil as an individual trickster who travels widely to enact his devastation: 'Boll weevil left Texas Lord he bid me fare you well/I'm going down to Mississippi going to give Louisiana hell' (ll. 7–8; see also ll. 11–12 and 15–16). This portrayal parallels the itinerant lifestyle of the migrant farm worker, a theme that translates into blues lyrics of many types. The migration of African-American men and of blues singers in particular is one of the most prominent themes of early blues song literature. Through this allusion, Patton creates a metaphorical link between the travelling blues singer and the trickster figure that functions as a subtextual means of claiming the trickster as an alter ego.

As a narrator, Patton strengthens the link between the boll weevil and the trickster figure. Beginning in line nine, he tells the boll weevil's story in a style very similar to the trickster narratives in the African-American tradition: 'Boll weevil and his wife went and sit down on the hill/Boll weevil told his wife let's take this forty in' (ll. 9–10; Taft 1983, p. 211). As a trickster figure, the boll weevil intentionally cheats the farmer of his crops and therefore becomes a role model for the narrator. The narrator identifies with the power of the insect that destroys the financial well-being of the landowner, and in this way expresses subliminally his own frustration and lack of power.

Many of the trickster characterisations, like Railroad Bill and boll weevil, incorporate negative, often antisocial, traits portraying the trickster's potential for violence and destruction. This depiction in blues lyrics parallels the cultural development, between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, of viewing the trickster as increasingly threatening to society, as described in John W. Roberts' book, *From Trickster to Badman*. The transformation of the trickster from the innocuous antics of Br'er Rabbit to an entity that must be avoided, feared and contained in order to preserve the sanctity of societal constructs and moral values may represent continued sublimation of African-American frustration, which received little outlet during this period (Roberts 1989). This portrayal of the 'badman' trickster also manifests itself in the many blues narratives in which an authorial voice admits to vices such as extreme alcohol and drug abuse, promiscuity, violence and murder. In this way, the blues singer assumes the persona of the badman, self-identifying with the trickster who is a real force of destruction for a society with strict moral codes.

In the African-American tradition, the most prominent trickster narrative is that of the Signifying Monkey who speaks in double entendres. This story is typically told by black men as a traditional, but ever-changing, oral narrative. Henry Louis Gates Jr, in his book explicating the process of signifying as a theory of literary criticism, describes the basic plot in the following excerpt:

> In the narrative poems, the Signifying Monkey invariably repeats to his friend, the Lion, some insult purportedly generated by their mutual friend, the Elephant. The Monkey, however, speaks figuratively. The Lion, indignant and outraged, demands an apology of the Elephant, who refuses and then trounces the Lion. The Lion, realizing that his mistake was to take the Monkey literally, returns to trounce the Monkey. It is this relationship between the literal and the figurative, and the dire consequences of their confusion, which is the most striking repeated element of these tales. The Monkey's trick depends on the Lion's inability to mediate between these two poles of signification, of meaning. (Gates 1988, p. 55)

Like the double entendres of the signifying trickster character, the music of the blues encompasses several contradictory elements. These elements intersect to create

This content downloaded from
158.135.1.178 on Sun, 23 May 2021 22:43:47 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

a single form of expression that manifests itself in many different styles, from the down home blues of the Mississippi Delta and rural Texas, to the urban city blues of Chicago and St. Louis (to name only a few) over a time period that continues to stretch into the future, but with clear roots in the late nineteenth century. Ironically, one of the common elements found in such divergent styles and performance practices is the inherent compositional and topical contrast in the vast repertoire.

The music is improvisatory yet formulaic. Although (in theory) no one performance is repeated twice, certain textual, melodic and harmonic patterns emerge to form the basis for newly improvised material. The performer's genius lies in the ability to create originality out of pre-existing musical topoi. As an oral literature, the texts contain elements of the miniature epic; the drama here is not one of Odysseus or Aeneas, but the life of the generic African-American, represented in a patchwork of smaller, sometimes personal or individualistic vignettes. Yet those narrative elements can be arranged in such a way as to be inscrutable, enigmatic or even nonsensical. The poet-singer's genius, therefore, lies in weaving together lines and ideas from a much larger oral tome to evoke a particular sentiment in the thread of a new narrative. This sentiment summoned by the text can be emotionally downcast and yet uplifting, even cathartic, in the process of performance. The texts themselves often deal with issues of oppression, financial difficulty and marginalisation, yet still document the newly found freedom of self-determination in this music that is the post-Civil War counterpart to the African-American spiritual.

By focusing attention on such contradictory elements, one recognises a similarity to the process of signifying in African-American culture. These contrasts in the blues hearken back to the Signifying Monkey's West African ancestor Esu-Elegbara, a figure that embodies the juncture between word and meaning (Gates 1988, p. 55). It is this mediating juncture – the limen between text and interpretation – that allows for the double meaning utilised by the trickster figure in the first place. In other words, the point at which these contradictory elements in the blues cross over each other carves out a space for signifying practice. Two important and related metaphorical tropes develop out of this mediating juncture – border crossings and crossroads – both of which can inform our understanding of the blues.

Borders, crossroads, mediation and interpretation

Borders and crossroads are recurring themes in African-American history and culture. The historical models of the Middle Passage and post-Civil War migration are re-enacted in African-American cultural aesthetics as transferred forms of expression. Such border crossings are reflected in artistic, musical and literary genres, and represent attempts to reconcile the traditional with the modern, the African with the American, and the self with the Other. As scholar Alma Jean Billingslea-Brown has shown in her book *Crossing Borders through Folklore*, these intersections are most readily apparent in art forms and literary works in which traditional or folk design elements are applied in a modern context, often to create jarring contrast, intellectual process and emotional healing (Billingslea-Brown 1999, p. 1). Like signifying, the process of border crossing involves an element of duality in its essence and purpose; while on the one hand, borders create ostensibly insurmountable boundaries, on the other hand, the act of crossing such borders can be simultaneously provocative and conciliatory:

This content downloaded from
158.135.1.178 on Sun, 23 May 2021 22:43:47 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

> For people of African descent in the Americas, forced migration, dislocation, and displacement produced an experiential borderland . . . Because borders are erected to separate, marginalize, and exclude, borderlands are sites of contestation, transition, and flux. At the same time, they are places of communication, negotiation, and exchange. (Billingslea-Brown 1999, p. 1)

While Billingslea-Brown applies her theory to modern African-American art and literature, the same liminal, mediatory principle of border crossings applies to the blues. In the blues, border crossings are manifested in two common thematic tropes – crossroads and railroads – and are linked to the signifying trickster figure in many different ways. In blues texts, the crossroads trope, like artistic and literary border crossings, represents mediation between dualities. At the most basic level, the crossroads topic embodies the post-Civil war dilemma of freedom and choice after the long period of slavery. The crossroads at once symbolises freedom of movement, travel, and self-determination; the dilemma of the crossroads is that one must choose which path to follow. The crossroads dilemma thus represents interpretive difference, or the space between word and meaning, just as the practice of signifying creates the spatial difference between text and its interpretation.

The crossroads are intrinsically linked to the practice of signifying through Esu-Elegbara, the Signifying Monkey's West African ancestor, who exists under different names in many West African cultures and throughout the Americas, including Legba, Exú, Echu-Elegua, Papa Legba, and Papa La Bas (Gates 1988, p. 5). Henry Louis Gates Jr describes Esu's function in all of these diasporic narrative traditions as a mediator situated at the crossroads:

> Each version of Esu is the sole messenger of the gods . . . , he who interprets the will of the gods to man; he who carries the desires of man to the gods. Esu is the guardian of the crossroads, master of style and of stylus, the phallic god of generation and fecundity, master of that elusive, mystical barrier that separates the divine world from the profane. Frequently characterized as an inveterate copulator possessed by his enormous penis, linguistically Esu is the ultimate copula, connecting truth with understanding, the sacred with the profane, text with interpretation, the word (as a form of the verb *to be*) that links a subject with its predicate. He connects the grammar of divination with its rhetorical structures. In Yoruba mythology, Esu is said to limp as he walks precisely because of his mediating function: his legs are of different lengths because he keeps one anchored in the realm of the gods while the other rests in this, our human world. (Gates 1988, p. 6)

Signifying, in both literature and music, is a form of troping that involves what Gates calls 'repetition with a difference' (Gates 1988, p. 66). The originality and ingenuity of the author, composer and performer is in his or her ability to create something new out of something pre-existing. Signifying goes beyond simple imitation, however; to signify, the creative artist must trope in a way that comments upon the original in a new interpretive context. Signifying, therefore, creates a new subtext through the intersection of the original with the trope that is analogous to the physical and metaphorical nature of the crossroads.

In the blues, the crossroads are therefore the locus of an American Esu. The interpretational uncertainty represented by the crossroads creates a spatial and temporal realm of ambiguity. This is the realm of the trickster figure. In the blues tradition, this trickster figure is often represented as the devil. In mythological accounts, both Robert Johnson and Tommy Johnson learned to play the guitar from the devil at a crossroads, while Peetie Wheatstraw referred to himself as the 'devil's son-in-law' (Spencer 1993, p. 29). By invoking these supernatural elements in pseudo-autobiographical contexts, these blues singers make a direct connection between their musical craft and the art of signifying. This connection is accomplished through a

This content downloaded from
158.135.1.178 on Sun, 23 May 2021 22:43:47 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

border crossing; by creating a complex chain of associative meaning, from representing the devil as a trickster figure to assuming that figure as an alter ego, these singers represent traditional folkloric elements in a modern context.

This association between the devil and Esu works on a metaphorical level and also has some basis in West-African religion as conveyed through African-American hoodoo. As Spencer explains in his book entitled *Blues and Evil*:

> In voodoo-hoodoo religious belief it was at the crossroads that one could find not the devil but Legba, the most powerful trickster god . . . The confusion of [Legba with the devil] is easily explainable. Just as early Christian missionaries . . . taught their African converts that Legba was Satan, so did the semi-dualism of Christianity, imposed upon the holistic cosmology of the Africans brought to America as captives, force Legba . . . into the satanic role. (Spencer 1993, p. 28)

Confirmation of the devil as trickster exists in narratives by two blues singers, James Son Thomas and Skip James, who depict the devil as a mischievous character thrown out of Heaven due to extreme misbehaving. According to the former, 'the devil took his tail and drug down three thirds of heaven while he was up there. That's why the Lord put him in a sealed-up place where he can't get out' (Grossman 1969, p. 115; Ferris 1979, p. 86; Spencer 1993, p. 18). After first portraying the devil as an instigator and manipulator ('You's a mean old devil cause me to weep and moan', l. 3), Joe Williams' 1929 song 'Mr. Devil Blues' closes with a reference to the devil's folkloric fall from grace due to trickster-like behaviour: 'I'm going to write a letter now going to mail it in the air/I'm going to ask Dr. Jesus if the devil ever been there' (ll. 13–14; Taft 1983, p. 311).

The association of the devil and the crossroads is of course celebrated and propagated in blues mythologies indicating that a musician could receive supernatural abilities from the devil if he played at a crossroads at midnight. Although Robert Johnson gained the most fame by invoking this mythology,[2] Clara Smith was the earliest blues singer to sing about selling her soul to the devil. In her 1924 song 'Done Sold My Soul to the Devil', she alternately portrays the persistence of the devil's chase ('He trails me like a bloodhound he's quicker than a snake/He follows right behind me every crooked turn I make', ll. 1–2; Taft 1983, p. 242) and the narrator's assumption of trickster characteristics ('I'm stubborn and I'm hateful', l. 3). The second half of Smith's song invokes two characteristics of signifying – exaggeration and boasting ('I'd drink carbolic acid and I'd poke a gatling gun', l. 4) – and also alludes to the jungle setting of the original Signifying Monkey tales ('I live down in the valley right by a hornet's nest/Where lions bears and tigers all come to take their rest', ll. 5–6; *op. cit.*). This song provides a clear example not only of how the devil is marked as a trickster figure in the blues, but also of how those trickster characteristics are then transferred to the narrator.

While there are many song texts both marking the devil as a trickster figure and indicating narrative assumption of trickster characteristics, three songs by Bo Chatman, Sam Collins and Charley Patton demonstrate the importance of this connection. Each of these songs begins with a portrayal of the devil's mischievousness:

> Go back old devil and look up on your shelf
> And get you soap and water and bathe your dirty self.
> (Chatman, 'Old Devil', 1938, l. 1; Taft 1983, p. 57)

> Yonder comes the devil going to set this town on fire.
> (Collins, 'Devil in the Lion's Den', 1927, l. 3; Taft 1983, p. 64)

This content downloaded from
158.135.1.178 on Sun, 23 May 2021 22:43:47 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Good Lord send the sunshine devil he send the rain.
(Patton, 'Devil Sent the Rain', 1929, l. 1; Taft 1983, p. 212)

Each of these songs is based on a three-part structure. After invoking the devil as a trickster figure, the narratives quickly move from the devil as an external force to an assumption of the devil's trickster characteristics by the narrator:

I beat my baby with a rope and a line
Until she went stone blind.
(Chatman, ll. 3–4; *op. cit.*)

I got ways like the devil slipping around your gate.
(Collins, l. 5; *op. cit.*)

You sure don't know sure don't know my mind
I don't show you my ticket and you don't know where I'm going.
(Patton, ll. 3–4; *op. cit.*)

Although Collins' text makes the most explicit relationship between narrator and trickster, the physical aggression depicted in Chatman's text also makes clear the narrator's assumption of trickster qualities. Patton's song, however, goes one step further than the other two; in this text, Patton links the image of the devil as a trickster figure with the psychological aspects of signifying. The devil is not just a trickster, but a version of Esu whose speech and actions lie at the crossroads between perception and cognition. Therefore, the narrator also assumes the inscrutability of the trickster persona, which necessitates analysis to mediate between conceptual intentions, their realisation through action or speech, and their eventual subjective interpretation. Finally, once the assumption of the trickster persona has occurred in each of these song texts, the narratives move to the themes of transitoriness and infidelity in relationships. It is therefore the assumption of the trickster persona that allows the narrator to become the swaggering, badman folk villain who is incapable of remaining within traditional societal structures.

In a manner similar to Charley Patton's 'Devil Sent the Rain', Lonnie Johnson's 1938 song 'Devil's Got the Blues' links the devil with the psychological effect of signifying. Furthermore, he strengthens the relationship between the blues as an emotional state and as a music form to the devil as a trickster figure:

My brains is cloudy my soul is upside down
When I get that lowdown feeling I know the blues must be somewhere close around.
The blues is like the devil it comes on you like a spell
Blues will leave your heart full of trouble and your poor mind full of hell.
(ll. 3–6; Taft 1983, p. 143)

Just as the lion, the victim of the monkey's signifying in the tales of the signifying monkey, becomes confused and perplexed by the interpretive difference between word and action, so the narrator is disoriented by the onslaught of the blues. The simile 'the blues is like the devil' in this context reflects an understanding that the blues are parallel to signifying.

Robert Johnson creates a similar depiction, both textually and musically, in his 1936 song 'Preachin' Blues': 'The blues is a low-down shaking chill/You ain't never had them I hope you never will' (ll. 5–6; Taft 1983, p. 148). In this song, textual references to the similarities between the blues and the signifying trickster are also manifested in a form of musical signifying. The title and portions of the text pay homage to the song's source, Son House's 'Preachin' the Blues, pt. 2' (1930). Several of

This content downloaded from
1:ffff:ffff:ffff:ffff:ffff on Thu, 01 Jan 1976 12:34:56 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

the textual lines of Robert Johnson's song derive from Son House's original, but Johnson has created a new context for their interpretation. While Son House creates an explicit link between the blues man and the traditional African-American religious fervour, Robert Johnson prefers to leave this metaphor up to his listener's imagination. Although this song begins with Robert Johnson's characteristic descending, chromatic melodic line in the guitar, it soon becomes something very different from his typical style, breaking into an aggressive, rhythmic, and percussive strumming pattern with a static, single-chord harmony at the entrance of the voice. The wailing moans in the voice, which are borrowed from the African-American preaching tradition, are the only representation of the song's subject. Johnson thus signifies on House's original by now letting the preacher's moans represent the blues feeling. This more emotionally charged setting creates a more intense characterisation of the blues that is musically analogous to the aggressive trickster figure. Although the devil does not appear as a character in Johnson's song, the subtitle, 'Up Jumped the Devil', implies a relationship between the blues and the devil as agents of mischievous signifying. In the process of signifying, Johnson shows us how the blues musically personifies the signifying trickster-devil figure.

A similar example of musical signifying occurs in Robert Johnson's 'Hell Hound on My Trail' of 1937. The first four lines of the text evoke the breathlessness of the devil's chase, as in Clara Smith's 'Done Sold My Soul to the Devil', discussed above: 'I've got to keep moving blues falling down like hail/And the days keep on worrying me there's a hellhound on my trail' (ll. 1–2; Taft 1983, p. 149). The bloodhound of Smith's song becomes the hellhound of Johnson's. Johnson's music, however, derives indirectly from Skip James' 'Devil Got My Woman' of 1931, as transmitted through Johnnie Temple's more recent song, 'The Evil Devil Blues' of 1935. Although the only textual similarity between Johnson's song and the two earlier versions is an allusion to the narrator's 'rambling mind', the musical quotations create a frame of reference for listeners familiar with the earlier songs:

You sprinkled hot-foot powder mmm around my door
It keeps me with a rambling mind rider every old place I go.
(Johnson, ll. 5–6; Taft 1983, p. 149)

I lay down last night and I tried to take my rest
My mind got to rambling like the wild geese from the west.
(Temple, ll. 7–8; Taft 1983, p. 266; James, ll. 5–6; Taft 1983, p. 122)

As with 'Preachin' Blues', Johnson's text bears only a passing similarity to his sources, but the direct musical quotations conjure up the textual images so prevalent in the earlier songs, namely, the devil as an evil, instigating trickster figure. By creating an extra layer of musical meaning, Johnson is able to focus his text more succinctly on his superstitious images, while his music signifies on the relationship between the devil and the trickster figure. Just as in 'Preachin' Blues', the outcome is a more intense, chilling characterisation than that of his sources. The musical allusion to the devil trickster figure heightens the urgency of Johnson's text, and strengthens the association between the blues as instigator and the chase of the hellhound.

The description of the blues as an emotional affliction in these songs reflects a resemblance to specific West African cultural initiation rituals. Literary scholar Thomas F. Marvin notes the similarity between the disorientation of one affected by the blues and the trance-like experience of initiates to the *bori* cult among the Hausa. These trance-like states are provoked by musicians, who are granted the role of

This content downloaded from
158.135.1.178 on Sun, 23 May 2021 22:43:47 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

preserving the oral history and traditions of the cult (Marvin 1996, pp. 592–3, 607n). The blues musician, and by extension the trickster-devil figure, are both analogous to the trance-provoking musicians of Hausa origin, through the similarities in their functions. Both the American blues musician and the Hausa cult musician are keepers, interpreters and transmitters of cultural identity – human versions of the mediating Esu. By actively invoking these complex layers of associative meaning, blues musicians utilise border crossings to connect past and present traditions within a new cultural context.

By invoking the devil at the crossroads mythology, the blues singer assumes the role of the trickster's protégé, a human double for the divine Esu. All of Esu's mediating and signifying characteristics are transferred to the guitarist, who is now granted a superhuman musical ability. The musician's performance retains the original qualities of Esu. The guitarist becomes the mediator; the music becomes the text that must be interpreted. The act of performing becomes one of signifying. The music also assumes a mediating spirit in its virtuosity; it is neither tangible nor imaginary, neither attainable nor surreal, but lies at some point in between. The music thus personifies Esu.

The propagation of the devil-at-the-crossroads myth serves a greater purpose than simply 'hyping up' or trumpeting the skill and virtuosity of the performer. It signifies on a primal literary notion (making a pact with the Devil) and an established African tradition (Esu-elegbara) in a modern context. Folklore thus becomes a strategy for border crossing and confrontation of Otherness in the African-American tradition.

As a similar mediating device, the railroad topic forms an interesting parallel to the crossroads mythology in the blues. Hundreds of blues songs treat the railroad thematically. The fascination with the railroad in blues expression harkens back to its subtextual implications in slave songs; the train could refer to the Underground Railroad specifically, and, more generally, to freedom in both secular and sacred realms, as in the spiritual 'Gospel Train'. Blues texts treat the railroad similarly, where it represents many of the same concepts linked to the crossroads – freedom of movement, travel and self-determination. Less obvious, however, are some of the other common associations the railroad shares with the crossroads – the dilemma of freedom and choice, the mediation between dualities, and the train's function as a liminal vessel.

The train as a mode of transportation, in addition to its common association with the Underground Railroad and the Gospel Train of the spiritual, is interconnected with the historical development of the blues as a genre. W.C. Handy, the self-termed 'Father of the Blues', and indeed one of the earliest collectors, composers and historians of the genre, documents the importance of the train to the first generation of blues performers, who entertained travellers in the station and thereby earned their fare to continue down the line. The 'Golden Age' of blues in urban settings was precipitated by the availability of the train to carry men in search of employment to Northern and Midwestern cities. It is only natural, then, that this mode of transportation, so closely linked with the image of freedom in the historical black consciousness, and so crucial to the development of this musical genre, would figure so highly in the song texts.

The separation of people from each other and from their homes, however, creates an attendant dilemma. Generally speaking, this dilemma falls along gender lines in blues texts. Frequently, the male blues singer portrays the train in a positive light, as a tool for escape, for moving on and starting over. Conversely, the female

This content downloaded from
158.135.1.178 on Sun, 23 May 2021 22:43:47 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

blues singer portrays the train as an object of hatred and transferred anger against societal situations; the responsibility for carrying away her emotional and financial support lies with the mode of transportation.

The railroad track also corresponds to the metaphor of the crossroads in its physical division of one place from another. The tracks stereotypically segregate one section of town from another, hence the expression that one could come from 'the wrong side of the tracks'. Thus, the vehicle that provides social and financial mobility also creates social marginalisation and separation. While the railroad car mediates between distant locales, the railroad track mediates between contiguous neighbourhoods and divergent social classes.

One trope of the railroad topic calls for the destruction of the liminal properties of the train. In these songs, surges in anger are directed at either the railroad track or the trestle of the railroad bridge (another liminal object) in an imaginative fantasy that plays out on two or three different levels. Lucille Bogan's 'T N and O Blues' of 1933 provides a particularly well elaborated example of this type: 'Going to beat the train to the crossing going to burn the trestle down/That's the onliest way I can keep my man in town' (ll. 5–6; Taft 1983, p. 34). At face value, the anger is directed at personal relationship issues in cases where the train has carried away a loved one. However, these issues are symptomatic of a greater societal concern – the migratory lifestyle of African-Americans, engendered by economic opportunity (or the lack thereof), and the subsequent breakdown of the family unit. In a metaphorical sense, the anger of these songs is directed at larger societal issues: the narrators seek destruction of a conceptual border that designates Otherness and creates a sense of marginalisation. In so doing, the narrators mark themselves as signifying tricksters whose actions fall outside of the boundaries established by societal norms.

As a liminal vessel, neither here nor there, the train represents a spatial Otherness and therefore a potential locus for signifying. Just as Esu presides over the crossroads, a juncture of two dualities, the liminal, intermediary nature of the railroad car also invokes his presence. By building an entire repertoire of songs connected to the railroad, blues musicians have created a locus or domain for signifying. By analogy to the original Signifying Monkey tales, which alternately and reflexively refer to and revise one another, the various musical and textual variants of the railroad topic signify on this species of blues songs as a whole.

The perception of the train as a liminal vessel is confirmed in several songs by its association with death. In this trope, the narrator threatens to lay himself on the track. These songs represent the awesome power of railroad machinery and reflect the often dispiriting separation of people. Here, the train functions liminally not only as a means of transportation, providing mediation between physical locales, but also between this world and the next. These songs invoke the train's mechanical force as an alternative means of relating the inherent dangers and difficulties of a migrating lifestyle.

One of these songs particularly captures the association of the railroad with crossroads mythology by invoking the dilemma of decision-making. Peetie Wheatstraw's 'Crazy with the Blues' (1937) describes how the narrator is afflicted with the blues:

I wake up this morning just crazy with the blues
I can't even tell oh well well the difference in my shoes
I am just a crazy fool I can't do a thing
I am just jumping around here oh well well now like a monkey on the end of a string

This content downloaded from
158.135.1.178 on Sun, 23 May 2021 22:43:47 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

I went downtown this morning with my hat on upside down
The people looked at me like they thought that I was a country clown
I heard somebody call me it was the policeman on his beat
Well well now he just wanted to tell me oh well well that I was driving on the wrong side of the street
Folks I keep on telling you that I'm just a-crazy with the blues
I'm going to the railroad then to the river Oh well well but I don't know which one that I will choose.
(Taft 1983, p. 297)

Here, the blues as a malady is portrayed with outrageous exaggeration, a marker of signifying. The upside-down world of the Signifying Monkey, where the trickster figure controls the perception, understanding and actions of his victims, is alluded to in the line 'like a monkey on the end of a string'. Thus, the narrator directly connects the world of blues experience and the narrative ambiguity and manipulation of the signifying monkey. In one final hyperbolic line, the narrator suggests that the upside-down reversals caused by blues affliction are insurmountable. He stands at a metaphorical crossroads, and must decide how to end the confusion – either by means of the railroad or the river, both of which symbolise liminal passages in the physical and spiritual sense.[3]

Conclusion

In conclusion, the crossroads and railroad topics in the blues are thus inherently tied to representations and interpretations of trickster figures that hearken back to narratives from African and African-American oral traditions. In both topics, the singer-poet connects the character traits and the mediatory function of Esu, the original trickster who stands for all of the subsequent diasporic manifestations. In the process, the blues musician adopts a trickster-like persona, both through the narrative content of the texts, and through the use of first-person statements that graft specific trickster characteristics back onto the singer. It is this assumption of the trickster persona and its liminal position that allows the blues musician to signify. This use of the trickster, along with his associated mediatory function, signifying language, and mischievous exploits, is actuated through border crossings. Such border crossings, in their pervasive appearance in crossroads and railroad tropes in the blues, are intimately linked to the African-American historical and cultural experience.

By viewing blues texts through the lens of literary criticism, we can further appreciate the complex layers of associative meaning inherent in these songs, and forge a stronger bond between literary and musical analysis. From a literary standpoint, this analysis clarifies the relationship between two critical theories – signifying and border crossing – and provides a new context for understanding the cultural and literary value of early folk blues poetry. From a musical standpoint, it provides an interpretation of how the blues can signify beyond musical and textual imitation. It is not so much the imitation of one artist by another, but the new contextual implications arising from such imitation, that creates meaning. Signifying is not just the outcome of witty verbal display, but a whole process of veiling and masking that ultimately allows the singer greater freedom in speaking out against marginalisation and pushing the limits of social boundaries. In the context of the blues, signifying as a process begins with the singer's emulation of the trickster figure; subsequently, the musician can signify in both text and music. By understanding how crossroads and railroads

This content downloaded from
158.135.1.178 on Sun, 23 May 2021 22:43:47 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

are linked as mediatory tropes in the blues, we can also gain further insight into African-American identity in the early twentieth century. By focusing on perceived borders with the attendant dilemmas of 'crossing over', blues musicians demonstrate the differences between African-American desires and, in the frustration of those desires, the reality they faced. Just as signifying can create ambiguous meanings, border crossings delineate the difference between two realms. Since signifying and border crossings are both such integral parts of African-American history and experience, it is particularly important to recognise ways in which they are manifested in African-American artistic genres.

Endnotes

1. The author acknowledges the kind permission of the publisher to reprint the transcriptions quoted in this article.
2. Barry Lee Pearson and Bill McCulloch (2003) investigate the origins, meaning and propagation of the devil mythology surrounding Robert Johnson's biography in their book, *Robert Johnson: Lost and Found*.
3. In spirituals, the River Jordan often represents a border between this life and the next, or between slavery and freedom. It is a mediating threshold, since it divides one realm or existence from another, in the same way that Esu moderates between word and meaning.

References

Abrahams, R.D. 1977. 'The training of the man of words in talking sweet', in *Verbal Art as Performance*, ed. R. Bauman (Prospect Heights, IL, Waveland Press)

Billingslea-Brown, A.J. 1999. *Crossing Borders Through Folklore: African American Women's Fiction and Art* (Columbia and London, University of Missouri Press)

Ferris, W. 1979. *Blues from the Delta* (Garden City, NY, Anchor/Doubleday)

Gates, Jr, H.L. 1988. *The Signifying Monkey: a Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York, Oxford University Press)

Grossman, S. 1969. *Delta Blues Guitar* (New York, Oak)

Handy, W.C. 1957. *Father of the Blues: an Autobiography*, ed. A. Bontemps (London, Sedgwick & Jackson)

Marvin, T.F. 1996. 'Children of Legba: musicians at the crossroads in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man', *American Literature*, 68/3, pp. 587–606

Pearson, B.L., and McCulloch, B. 2003. *Robert Johnson: Lost and Found* (Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press)

Roberts, J.W. 1989. *From Trickster to Badman: the Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press)

Smith, J.R. 1997. *Writing Tricksters: Mythic Gambols in American Ethnic Literature* (Berkeley, University of California Press)

Spencer, J.M. 1993. *Blues and Evil* (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press)

Taft, M. 1983. *Blues Lyric Poetry: an Anthology* (New York, Garland Publishers)

Watkins, M. 1994. *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying and Signifying* (New York, Simon and Schuster)

Discography

Son House, 'Preachin' the Blues, pt. 2', *Blues Masters Volume 8: Mississippi Delta Blues*. Rhino Records, R2 71130.

Skip James, 'Devil Got My Woman', *The Roots of Robert Johnson*. Yazoo Records, 1073.

Robert Johnson, 'Cross Road Blues', *Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings*. Columbia Records, C2K 46222.

'Preaching Blues (Up Jumped the Devil)', *Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings*. Columbia Records, C2K 46222.

'Hellhound on My Trail', *Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings*. Columbia Records, C2K 46222.

'Me and the Devil Blues', *Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings*. Columbia Records, C2K 46222.

Charley Patton, 'Mississippi Bo Weavil Blues', *Charlie Patton: Founder of the Delta Blues*. Yazoo Records, 2010.

'Devil Sent the Rain', *Charlie Patton: Founder of the Delta Blues*. Yazoo Records, 2010.

This content downloaded from
158.135.1.178 on Sun, 23 May 2021 22:43:47 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms